DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 225 211 CS 504 084

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TITLE A Model for Evaluating the Communication Skills of College Students.
PUB DATE [82]
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Basic Skills; College Students; Communication Skills; *Educational Assessment; *Evaluation Criteria; *Evaluation Methods; Evaluation Needs; *General Education; Higher Education; *Program Evaluation; *Program Improvement
IDENTIFIERS *Wayne State University MI

ABSTRACT

In the first stage of a project to improve the general education offerings at Wayne State University (Michigan), the ad hoc committee on general education defined those basic academic skills that a general education program should promote. The process of defining and evaluating the basic skill of communication typified the process of defining and evaluating each of the other basic skills in the program. The second stage dealt with establishing criteria for determining whether students had acquired these basic skills. In the third stage of the project, the committee developed a procedure to determine whether, where, and to what extent the students were acquiring skills in communication. This stage required gathering data on the general education program and selecting appropriate tests. It was decided that the least obtrusive and intrusive way of gathering information would be to collect papers, tests, and quizzes written for specific classes. In stage four, faculty evaluation committees were formed to deal with the material collected in the previous stage and to finalize evaluation criteria. In stage five, the data on student performance was evaluated and the program reassessed. (A communication skills data summary is included.) (JL)

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A MODEL FOR EVALUATING THE COMMUNICATION SKILLS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

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Abstract

Wayne State College and nine other institutions were recently selected to participate in a three-year national project designed to examine general education models in higher education and to evaluate students' achievement in several skill areas (communication, quantification, analysis, synthesis, and valuing). The project was called the Academic Program Evaluation Project (APEP) and was sponsored by the Resource Center for Planned Change (RCPC) of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) with funding from the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE).

The following paper suggests a model for evaluating one of the skill areas examined--namely, communication. It defines in operational terms what we mean by effective communication; it delineates what achievements and the desired level of those achievements Wayne State College students are expected to manifest; and it reports the results of more than 8000 individual evaluations responding to this particular area of concern.

This model for evaluating communication skills has proved to be very valuable to Wayne State College's faculty, students, and administration and could be easily adapted to other institutions of higher education.

A MODEL FOR EVALUATING THE COMMUNICATION SKILLS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Introduction

Wayne State College recently took two very important steps toward improving its general education offerings. The first was the establishment of an ad hoc Committee on General Education, which was charged with examining and reporting the outcomes of a general education program review and the second was the participation in a national research project. These two steps resulted from a longstanding commitment toward improving general education at Wayne State College. However, with limited institutional resources at our disposal, we found the evaluation of the general education program to be a more difficult process than was expected.

When the Academic Program Evaluation Project (APEP), under the sponsorship of the Resource Center for Planned Change (RCPC) of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and supported in part by the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE), was announced, we still did not know how well we were promoting basic academic skills and did not have an effective means for making that determination. Therefore, we were eager to participate in the AASCU Project, which provided resources that would not normally be available and allow for a more intense and more widespread evaluation of our general education program than would otherwise have been possible. Thus, Wayne State College submitted a proposal titled "Fulfilling a Deferred Commitment: Evaluating Program Effectiveness in General Education--The Role of Wayne State College" to the Resource Center for Planned Change of AASCU for consideration. We were notified shortly thereafter that Wayne State College was one of the ten institutions selected nationally to participate in the AASCU Project and immediately formed an institutional APEP Committee.

It was decided that the Committee should include a faculty member from each of our eight academic divisions as well as four student representatives. Faculty members were selected by each division in consultation with the Faculty

Senate, the APEP Project Director, and the APEP Project Coordinator. The Committee agreed that at some future date three additional faculty members would be selected to comment on and provide constructive criticism regarding progress toward the project's goals. Both the faculty and the administration considered it especially important to have representatives from every academic division on the Committee so that the project would be recognized as being the concern of the entire campus. It was also felt that faculty members on the Committee should, as far as possible, be remunerated from project funds for work beyond that which would normally be considered a part of their regular duties.

Stage I

The first stage of the project, and therefore the first task for the Committee, was to arrive at definitions of those basic academic skills that a general education program should promote. The remainder of this paper will focus on one of these basic skills, namely, Communication.

A major concern of the Committee as they undertook this task was that the definition not reflect any indication of where in the curriculum the skill should be taught. For example, we did not want to assume in our definition that communication was solely the concern of the English department. It was also felt that the definition arrived at should not be so broad and general as to be useless for the purposes of the project.

The Committee decided that it would allow its members substantial time to consult with colleagues in their respective divisions and to clarify and formulate their own notions of communication. After discussing each other's definitions, members could then rethink and refine their own definitions for a future meeting until some agreement could be reached.

The process of defining the basic terms proved to be a difficult task and in initial discussions there was considerable disagreement. Two major objections to the kinds of definitions presented were raised. The first was that some Committee members had written definitions in terms of their own disciplines rather than definitions that would apply to general education. One member observed that, even within a given discipline, such definitions might result in our setting higher levels of student achievement than those we would expect from general education students. The second objection was that some of the definitions contained too much jargon which obfuscated

rather than clarified the terms in question.

The problems involved in agreeing to the meaning of "communication" in many ways typified those encountered in attempting to define each of the other basic skills that were ultimately addressed. A number of the initial definitions focused on written and oral communication or implied that these were the only means of communication. There were objections to these definitions because they excluded non-verbal methods of communication and made no provision for communication through scientific languages. Under these definitions, for example, the kind of message included on the Voyager satellite and designed to give some notion to our world to an extraterrestial civilization--that is, the pictures, music, and equations which scientists included--would not be considered a means of communicating.

After revision and rewriting, the following working definition of "communication" was developed:

> Competence in communication, in a very broad sense, involves all those procedures that allow an individual to express him/herself effectively. Within this broad range two distinct, though clearly related, types of competence may be identified. The first type is verbal competence. It is the ability to speak and write clearly and effectively. The second type is non-verbal competence. Skills in this area are displayed in a variety of non-verbal systems of codification, which range from aesthetic symbols to gesture and digital language systems. From this definition it follows that effective communication is a form of human behavior that may be exhibited in a variety of media and contexts.

(It should be noted that this definition was considered tentative by the Committee. Members felt that it would be better to have a working definition rather than a formal one, not only because of the difficulty of achieving a consensus but also because they expected that their own understanding of the complex terms involved would improve during the course of the project.)

Although there was some controversy over the definitions of the basic terms under consideration in the project, several members of the Committee felt that the process of attempting to define the terms would, in the long run, be as valuable as the definitions ultimately agreed upon since this process would force an examination of their division's and their own individual roles in general education at Wayne State College.

Stage II

The second stage of the project dealt with establishing criteria for determining whether or not students had acquired the basic skills that

general education should promote. The goal in this stage of the project was for the Committee, in consultation with the administration and the faculty-at-large, to determine the level of performance expected of undergraduates at Wayne State College. Some criteria were established but, in view of the revisions of the definitions, these also needed to be revised.

Stage III

The third stage of the project required the development of a procedure to determine whether, where, and to what extent undergraduates at Wayne State College were acquiring skills in communication. As part of the basis for determining which students and how many students would be selected for testing and to assist in future decisions regarding the curriculum, statistics relating to the general education program were gathered during this stage of the project. The data collected included enrollment statistics for selected key general education courses offered during the last three years including the number of sections offered, total enrollment, student-credit-hour production, and average section size, etc.

The next concern of the Committee was the testing process to be used to determine the levels our students had achieved in the particular skill area in question. At first the Committee favored using some sort of "objective" test, such as that devised by the Educational Testing Service (ETS). However, in the Committee's discussions several objections to relying on this or similar tests as the primary method of testing arose. It was noted that these tests had their own kind of subjectivity and that assuming the objectivity of an "unproven" test could be misleading.

Perhaps a more serious objection was that such tests were necessarily obtrusive and intrusive. If they were given during regular class hours, they would take time from classroom instruction and many of the faculty would find it difficult to surrender such time. Thus, we might not get as wide a sampling as we would like. It was also felt that such a process might be detrimental to the spirit of cooperation and participation that we had attempted to foster throughout the project.

Another objection was that even if sufficient faculty support was extant, there was a likelihood that we would have difficulty eliciting sufficient and appropriate student responses. If students were forced to take the tests in a given class, they might not attend the class or they might take the test but not take it seriously. Student members of the Committee were also concerned

that the testing of students for proficiency in the various skills would constitute a repetition of the kinds of testing they underwent in some of their courses, especially a course such as Freshman Composition. Although they were assured that this would not be the case, there was little doubt that some, if not many, of our students would perceive an additional battery of tests in a negative light.

On the other hand, it was felt that if students were asked to volunteer to take the tests, we might not get a large enough sampling to make the results valid for evaluating the general education program as a whole. In addition, those students who might volunteer would most likely be those who would feel most comfortable taking the tests and, therefore, those most likely to do well on them. This would influence the results since this self-selected sampling of students would be of above-average ability thus invalidating any conclusions we might attempt to draw.

One further consideration was that even if this kind of testing could be administered in such a way as to provide a valid indication of whether or not our general education program was successful in promoting the defined skill, it could not provide some of the basic information we were seeking in the AASCU Project. From its initiation, one of the aims of the project had been not only to seek information on whether students were acquiring certain fundamental skills in their general education courses, but also to discover where in the general education program these skills were being promoted. The Committee felt that we would not be aided in obtaining this information by administering tests such as those prepared by the ETS or by administering similar tests, whether prepared by an outside body or by our own faculty.

After much consideration, consultation, and discussion, the Committee felt that the only type of testing that would help us to obtain all the information needed would be something associated with regular courses and judged on the basis of promoting the defined skills rather than on the basis of the specific objectives of those courses. It was decided that the least obtrusive and intrusive way of gathering this information would be to collect papers, tests, and quizzes, etc., written for specific classes. This procedure assured that students would take tests seriously and do their best on assignments since they counted toward their course grades. It was, in short, a non-obtrusive method of gathering data and did not intrude on the normal functioning of the class since no time was taken away from classroom instruction for administering extra tests.

Students' names were removed from papers before they were evaluated so that they would have no fear of repercussions for poor performance and, while some of the faculty might have felt threatened by having their assignments and their students evaluated, most understood that the results were not to be used to judge or criticize individual instructors. As a result, approximately 50 percent of the faculty contributed materials for evaluation and the process of gathering materials continued throughout the entire semester.

We were aware that in this method of evaluation there might be some pitfalls which had to be avoided. For example, it was always kept in mind that the material gathered was not being judged as an assignment for a chemistry, history, math, or art course but rather as an indication of the ability to communicate. Therefore, the material was not judged by the professor submitting it or even by those in the same discipline (though these professors might have been consulted by the evaluating committee). It was our intention to establish mini- or sub-committees from the faculty-at-large to determine both whether the tests or assignments demanded of the student an ability to communicate, and whether the students had, in fact, demonstrated this ability.

It was also important that consistent criteria be used in evaluating all of the material gathered. The APEP Committee, with the assistance of the sub-committees, finalized the criteria to be used and developed a systematic method of evaluating these criteria. This provided a readily comprehensible means of reporting the results of our evaluation.

In addition to providing more of the information we needed, the method of testing we decided upon had several other advantages. First, it drew upon the expertise of our own faculty and required the participation of a greater number of the faculty--both as contributors of material and as evaluators of that material. This made the AASCU Project at Wayne State College more of a concerted effort and perhaps made the faculty as a whole more understanding of its aims and more willing to accept and implement changes that the project determined our curriculum needed. Our method also made more of the faculty aware of the necessity to promote the defined skills and of how this could be done in a variety of courses. It was hoped that this might lead to greater respect and cooperation among colleagues and more awareness among the faculty of their colleagues' problems. For example, those who never assign essays in their classes became more conscious of the difficulties encountered by those who do so regularly.

In short, by approaching our evaluation process with an awareness of the possible pitfalls involved in it, we believed we could minimize those pitfalls and capitalize upon its advantages.

Stage IV

In Stage IV of the project, our key objectives were to form faculty evaluation committees to deal with the large amount of material collected and to finalize the criteria by which the student material was to be evaluated. The following summer was devoted to the evaluation of this material and reports from the committees were submitted to the Project Coordinator.

The sets of tests, quizzes, essays, midterm and final evaluations, projects, etc., were catalogued in the Graduate Office and made available to members of the Communication Skills Subcommittee.

Each subcommittee member selected sets of performance data which seemed to manifest specific skills, and each student's performance was evaluated on a Likert-type scale ranging from not effective (1) to highly effective (5).

Subcommittee members recorded this information on a specially designed evaluation form; one form per set of materials evaluated. These forms were then collated and summarized along with the forms of the other members of the specific skill subcommittee. A statistical summary of the Committee's findings is attached.

In order to achieve as high a degree of consistency as possible in evaluating the student performance data, the communications subcommittee:

1) Held several meetings to determine the specific evaluation criteria to be applied to each set of data;

2) Examined numerous sets of student performance data to come to consensus on which sets best manifested performance to be evaluated by the committee;

3) Conducted several "trial runs" to determine how consistently each subcommittee member's evaluations compared with others.

To add another dimension toward achieving consistency, the mean score of attained skill level by each evaluator was determined.

In addition to the statistical information previously referred to, the Communication Skills Subcommittee decided to computerize its evaluations and to add 20 questions to help gain insight into less quantifiable but, nonetheless, very significant information. The results of this technique are attached.

From a research perspective, two major questions that arose were: Will the data be valid; that is, will it measure what it claims to measure? And,

will the data be reliable; that is, will it measure accurately and consistently from one time to another?

In addition, we considered the matter of internal validity (whether the observed occurrences were influenced by extraneous or uncontrolled factors) and external validity (whether the systematic relationships that were to be identified could be generalized--that is, used to predict relationships outside the Wayne State setting).

Another issue that was considered in the analysis of the data was that of the role of intervening and extraneous variables (those that could not be controlled or measured directly but might have an important effect on the outcome of the project).

Stage V

The objectives of Stage V of the project were to evaluate the data on student performance and determine the students' level of skill attainment consistent with the role and mission of Wayne State College, to remove discrepancies between desired and actual levels of student attainment, and to reenter various project stages if definitions needed modification or if new assessment/evaluation procedures needed to be adopted.

The assessment design developed by Wayne State College defined the parameters of the evaluation approach which sought to determine the extent to which our institution promoted undergraduate competence in communication skills. In other words, based on our approach to assessment, faculty members should have been able to identify and, perhaps, design measures that demonstrated how well Wayne State had accomplished its goals for student achievement in this particular skill area. In this regard we attempted to: 1) specify where and to what extent in each academic division, this skill was being promoted; 2) specify appropriate measures for this skill area, ranging perhaps, from unobtrusive measures to formal testing to expert judgment; 3) design and/or identify the necessary and appropriate administrative structure to carry out the evaluation plan.

In addition, decisions must continue to be made after the final analysis of student performance data regarding the remediation of any discrepancies between the real and the ideal levels of student performance. Determinations that identify whether such discrepancies are extant because of a lack of appropriate resources, an inappropriate curricular program, or an ineffective curricular design must continue to be made. In order to minimize these

discrepancies, institutional policies and procedures must continue to be examined and modified by institutional consensus in light of student performance.

As a result of the AASCU Project, all of us at Wayne State College have been made conscious of the complex issues involved in evaluating and improving our general education program. Many on campus have, despite the difficulties, committed themselves to this improvement. Perhaps most important, there has been a good deal of exposure regarding our problems and our goals. The Project Director and the Project Coordinator from the very beginning of the project, consulted regularly with the Faculty Senate, the Futures Planning Committee, and the Division Heads. The Project Director kept the Nebraska State College Board of Trustees informed of our progress while the Project Coordinator kept the faculty up-to-date and spoke to various educational groups about the project. Faculty members shared their ideas and opinions with the AASCU Committee and with their other colleagues. It is hoped that this heightened awareness, coupled with our measurement of student achievement and our continuing analysis of our general education offerings, will lead to an accurate evaluation of where we are and ultimately to the synthesis that will improve general education at Wayne State College and, perhaps, other colleges as well.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

DATA SUMMARY

Number of Course Evaluations = 34

Number of Different Evaluators = 4

Number of Student Evaluations = 868

Overall Mean of Attained Communication Skills = 3.38 on a scale of 1-5, one being ineffective and 5 highly effective

Mean Score of Attained Communications Skills:

General Education Courses = 3.41, n = 501

Non-General Education Courses = 3.33, n = 367

Mean Score of Attained Communications Skills by Course Level:

100 level = 3.38	Student n = 581
200 level = 3.33	Student n = 254
300 level = 3.76	Student n = 33
400 level = --	Student n = 0

Mean Score of Attained Communications Skills by Division:

App. Sci. = 3.44, n = 317	HPERA = 3.23, n = 202
Business = -- , n = 0	Humanities = 3.39, n = 235
Ed/Psych. = 3.90, n = 11	Math Sci. = 2.97, n = 48
Fine Arts = -- , n = 0	Soc. Sci. = 3.74, n = 55

Mean Score of Attained Communications Skills by Each Evaluator:

Evaluator A = 3.18, n = 312
Evaluator B = 3.52, n = 311
Evaluator C = 3.35, n = 234
Evaluator D = 3.94, n = 11

MEAN RESPONSES TO SPECIFIC COMMUNICATIONS QUESTIONS

(Highly Effective = 5; Not Effective = 1)

1. Are the student responses in technical or scientific language?

   25 yes 811 no

2. Are the student responses in non-technical or non-scientific language?

   780 yes 62 no

3. Are the student responses in both types of language?

   86 yes 752 no

4. Do the responses convey information and ideas clearly?

   $\bar{X}$ = 3.55 n = 749

5. Do the responses convey information and ideas coherently?

   $\bar{X}$ = 3.30 n = 704

6. Do the responses convey information and ideas correctly?

   $\bar{X}$ = 3.08 n = 766

7. Do the responses convey information and ideas concisely?

   $\bar{X}$ = 3.41 n = 751

8. Do the responses convey information and ideas in an organized manner?

   $\bar{X}$ = 3.30 n = 734

9. Do the responses convey information and ideas in a manner that is appropriate to the context?

   $\bar{X}$ = 3.45 n = 767

10. Do the responses convey feelings, attitudes, and values clearly?

    $\bar{X}$ = 3.47 n = 451

11. Do the responses convey feelings, attitudes, and values coherently?

    $\bar{X}$ = 3.28 n = 450

12. Do the responses convey feelings, attitudes, and values correctly?

    $\bar{X}$ = 3.06 n = 452

13. Do the responses convey feelings, attitudes, and values concisely?

    $\bar{X}$ = 3.37 n = 446

14. Do the responses convey feelings, attitudes, and values in an organized manner?

    $\bar{X}$ = 3.30 n = 452

15. Do the responses convey feelings, attitudes, and values in a manner that is appropriate to the context?

    $\bar{X}$ = 3.46 n = 422

16. Do the responses indicate that the respondent has received and understood the information and ideas conveyed through speech and writing?

    $\bar{X}$ = 3.45 n = 785

17. Do the responses indicate that the respondent has received and understood feelings, attitudes, and values conveyed through speech and writing?

    $\bar{X}$ = 3.46 n = 473

18. Do the responses indicate that the respondent has received and understood the information and ideas conveyed through art, literature, and music?

    $\bar{X}$ = 3.37 n = 149

19. Do the responses indicate that the respondent has received and understood the feelings, attitudes, and values conveyed through art, literature, and music?

    $\bar{X}$ = 3.41 n = 151